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Columbus Was a Dope

Robert A Heinlein

"I do like to wet down a sale," the fat man said happily, raising his voice above the sighing of the air conditioner. "Drink up, Professor, I'm two ahead of you."

He glanced up from their table as the elevator door opposite them opened. A man stepped out into the cool dark of the bar and stood blinking, as if he had just come from the desert glare outside.

"Hey, Fred - Fred Nolan," the fat man called out. "Come over!" He turned to his guest. "Man I met on the hop from New York. Siddown, Fred. Shake hands with Professor Appleby, chief engineer of the star ship Pegasus - or will be when she's built. I just sold the professor an order of bum steel for his crate. Have a drink on it."

"Glad to, Mr. Barnes," Nolan agreed. "I've met Dr. Appleby. On business - Climax Instrument Company."

"Huh?"

"Climax is supplying us with precision equipment," offered Appleby.

Barnes looked surprised, then grinned. "That's one on me. I took Fred for a government man, or one of you scientific johnnies. What'll it be, Fred? Old fashioned? The same, Professor?"

"Right. But please don't call me 'Professor.' I'm not one and it ages me. I'm still young."

"I'll say you are, uh - Doc. Pete! Two old fashioned and another double Manhattan! I guess I expected a comic book scientist, with a long white beard. But now that I've met you, I can't figure out one thing."

"Which is?"

"Well, at your age you bury yourself in this god-forsaken place - "

"We couldn't build the Pegasus on Long Island," Appleby pointed out, "and this is the ideal spot for the take off."

"Yeah, sure, but that's not it. It's - well, mind you, I sell steel. You want special alloys for a star ship; I sell it to you. But just the same, now that businesses out of the way, why do you want to do it? Why try to go to Proxima Centauri, or any other star?"

Appleby looked amused. "It can't be explained. Why do men try to climb Mount Everest? What took Peary to the North Pole? Why did Columbus get the Queen to hock her jewels? Nobody has ever been to Proxima Centauri - so we're going."

Barnes turned to Nolan. "Do you get it, Fred?"

Nolan shrugged. "I sell precision equipment. Some people raise chrysanthemums; some build star ships. I sell instruments."

Barnes's friendly face looked puzzled. "Well - " The bartender put down their drinks. "Say, Pete, tell me something. Would you go along on the Pegasus expedition if you could?"

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I like it here.”

Dr. Appleby nodded. “There’s your answer, Barnes, in reverse. Some have the Columbus spirit and some haven’t”

“It’s all very well to talk about Columbus,” Barnes persisted, ” but he expected to come back. You guys don’t expect to. Sixty years - you told me it would take sixty years. Why, you may not even live to get there.”

“No, but our children will. And our grandchildren will come back.”

“But - say, you’re not married?”

“Certainly I am. Family men only on the expedition. It’s a two-to-three generation job. You know that.” He hauled out a wallet. “There’s Mrs. Appleby, with Diane. Diane is three-and-a-half.”

“She’s a pretty baby,” Barnes said soberly and passed it on to Nolan, who smiled at it and handed it back to Appleby. Barnes went on. “What happens to her?”

“She goes with us, naturally. You wouldn’t want her put in an orphanage, would you?”

“No, but - ” Barnes tossed off the rest of his drink. “I don’t get it,” he admitted. “Who’ll have another drink?”

“Not for me, thanks,” Appleby declined, finishing his more slowly and standing up. “I’m due home. Family man, you know.” He smiled.

Barnes did not try to stop him. He said goodnight and watched Appleby leave.

“My round,” said Nolan. “The same?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure.” Barnes stood up. “Let’s get up to the bar, Fred, where we can drink properly. I need about six.”

“Okay,” Nolan agreed, standing up. “What’s the trouble?”

“Trouble? Did you see that picture?”

“Well?”

“Well, how do you feel about it? I’m a salesman, too, Fred. I sell steel. It don’t matter what the customer wants to use it for; I sell it to him. I’d sell a man a rope to hang himself. But I do love kids. I can’t stand to think of that cute little kid going along on that - that crazy expedition!”

“Why not? She’s better off with her parents. She’ll get as used to steel decks as most kids are

to sidewalks.”

“But look, Fred. You don’t have any silly idea they’ll make it, do you?”

“They might.”

“Well, they won’t. They don’t stand a chance. I know. I talked it over with out technical staff before I left the home office. Nine chances out of ten they’ll burn up on the take off. That’s the best that can happen to them. If they get out of the solar system, which ain’t likely, they’ll still never make it. They’ll never reach the stars.”

Pete put another drink down in front of Barnes. He drained it and said:

“Set up another one, Pete. They can’t. It’s a theoretical impossibility. They’ll freeze - or they’ll roast - or they’ll starve. But they’ll never get there.”

“Maybe so.”

“No maybe about it. They’re crazy. Hurry up with that drink Pete. Have one yourself.”

“Coming up. Don’t mind if I do, thanks.” Pete mixed the cocktail, drew a glass of beer, and joined them.

“Pete, here, is a wise man,” Barnes said confidentially. “You don’t catch him monkeying around with any trips to the stars. Columbus - Pfui! Columbus was a dope. He shoulda stood in bed.”

The bartender shook his head. “You got me wrong, Mr. Barnes. If it wasn’t for men like Columbus, we wouldn’t be here today - now, would we? I’m just not the explorer type. But I’m a believer. I got nothing against the Pegasus expedition.”

“You don’t approve of them taking kids on it, do you?”

“Well... there were kids on the Mayflower, so they tell me.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Barnes looked at Nolan, then back to the bartender. “If the Lord had intended us to go to the stars, he would have equipped us with jet propulsion. Fix me another drink, Pete.”

“You’ve had about enough for a while, Mr. Barnes.”

The troubled fat man seemed about to argue, thought better of it.

“I’m going up to the Sky Room and find somebody that’ll dance with me,” he announced. “G’night.” He swayed softly toward the elevator.

Nolan watched him leave. “Poor old Barnes.” He shrugged. “I guess you and I are hard-hearted, Pete.”

“No. I believe in progress, that’s all. I remember my old man wanted a law passed about flying machines, keep ‘em from breaking their fool necks. Claimed nobody ever could fly, and the government should put a stop to it. He was wrong. I’m not the adventurous type myself

but I've seen enough people to know they'll try anything once, and that's how progress is made."

"You don't look old enough to remember when men couldn't fly."

"I've been around a long time. Ten years in this one spot."

"Ten years, eh? Don't you ever get a hankering for a job that'll let you breathe a little fresh air?"

"Nope. I didn't get any fresh air when I served drinks on Forty-second Street and I don't miss it now. I like it here. Always something new going on here, first the atom laboratories and then the big observatory and now the star ship. But that's not the real reason. I like it here. It's my home. Watch this."

He picked up a brandy inhaler, a great fragile crystal globe, spun it, and threw it straight up toward the ceiling. It rose slowly and gracefully, paused for a long reluctant wait at the top of its rise, then settled slowly, slowly, like a diver in a slow-motion movie. Pete watched it float past his nose, then reached out with thumb and forefinger, nipped it easily by the stem, and returned it to the rack.

"See that" he said. "One-sixty gravity. When I was tending bar on earth, my bunions gave me the dickens all the time. Here I weigh only thirty-five pounds. I like it on the Moon."